

# SCOTTISH VITAMIN SCHEME - Vitamin D Policy Brief

## Background

1. The Scottish Government's 2019/20 Programme for Government<sup>1</sup> (PfG) included a commitment to enhance the current vitamins scheme in Scotland, providing free vitamin D universally for all children under 3 and to breastfeeding women. This was based on the CMO<sup>2</sup> advice and the recommendations from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN).
2. In Scotland, prior to this commitment, Healthy Start vitamins (A, C and D) were only available to children (up to age 4), pregnant women and mothers (1 year postnatal) who qualified for the UK Government Healthy Start Scheme through certain means-tested Social Security benefits.
3. Vitamin D products suitable for infants, children and breastfeeding women have been procured. Pro Health Solutions Ltd are the supplier. The products can be ordered by Health Boards from the framework and details have been published in the Buyers Guide.
4. Since 2017, all pregnant women in Scotland have been provided with free Healthy Start vitamins (C, D and folic acid) throughout their pregnancy. This will continue.

## Healthy Start and Best Start Foods

5. The Healthy Start Scheme was a UK-wide scheme, administered by the Dept of Health and Social Care, which entitles low-income families to receive vouchers for certain foods and vitamins for children under the age of four and pregnant women.
6. Best Start Foods (BSF) replaced Healthy Start in Scotland from August 2019. The new BSF scheme increased the range of healthy foods that can be purchased, some eligibility criteria and increased the voucher value. The new scheme also reduced the age threshold (from up to 4 to up to age 3) based on a wider policy review that included Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision. Under the Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme, which replaces the UK Nursery Milk scheme from August 2021, children aged 3 and over taking up the ELC offer will benefit from the provision of a free nutritious drink and healthy snack.
7. Entitlement to vitamins was not included in the BSF scheme. Instead this has been replaced by universal access to vitamin D provision for children under 3 and breastfeeding mothers. The eligible age ranges for children will be kept under review.
8. A public consultation<sup>3</sup>, seeking views on the BSF scheme and the provision of children's vitamins concluded that vitamins should be provided universally, rather than be means-tested, to all children up to the age of three.

## Vitamin D

9. Vitamin D is needed to support bone and muscle health. Our main source of vitamin D is sunlight. In Scotland, we only get enough of the right kind of sunlight for our bodies to make vitamin D from April to September. There are also a number of factors which can impact vitamin D synthesis, including skin coverage, use of sunscreen, level of cloud cover and time spent outside. From October to March, we are unable to make vitamin D from sunlight and rely on dietary sources of vitamin D. Vitamin D products are widely available for purchase at supermarkets and pharmacies.

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<sup>1</sup> [Protecting Scotland's Future: the Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-2020 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/protecting-scotland-s-future-the-government-s-programme-for-scotland-2019-2020/pages/120.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [Chief Medical Officer and Secretariat Division.dot \(cps.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/chief-medical-officer-and-secretariat-division/pages/120.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [Welfare Foods: consultation summary - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/welfare-foods-consultation-summary/pages/120.aspx)

10. Vitamin D supplement is not required for babies receiving infant formula until they are receiving less than 500ml of formula in a 24 hour period because infant formula has vitamin D added.

11. Vitamin D is found in small amounts in some foods, including eggs, oily fish and fortified foods such as breakfast cereals and spreads. However it is difficult to meet recommended intakes of vitamin D from food alone. Adults and children age 5 and over are recommended to consider taking a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D, particularly during the winter months.

12. Some groups are at higher risk of vitamin D deficiency and are advised to take a daily supplement all year round. This includes:

- pregnant and breastfeeding women;
- infants and children under 5 years old;
- people who have low or no exposure to the sun; and
- people from minority ethnic groups with dark skin such as those of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian origin, who require more sun exposure to make as much vitamin D.

13. Current advice on vitamin D is consistent across the four UK administrations and is based on recommendations by SACN published in 2016. Evidence<sup>4</sup> suggests that Vitamin D in the 0-1 and 1-5 age range is significantly below the Recommended Nutrient Intake (RNI) % in 50% of infants and pre-school children. Vitamin D deficiency is the most common cause of rickets - a condition that affects bone development in children leading to soft, weak bones that can lead to bone deformities.

14. A study published in 2011 found 109 cases of vitamin D deficiency reported through an electronic surveillance programme. For most children, rickets can be treated by ensuring they eat foods that contain vitamin D and by taking vitamin supplements.

### Vitamins A and C

15. Vitamins A and C are more readily available from dietary sources. Expert advice is that deficiency in vitamins A and C is very rare and in such cases other factors are usually present. The SACN report<sup>5</sup> on infant nutrition for the under ones based their recommendations on the Diet and Nutrition Survey of Infants and Young Children<sup>6</sup> (DNSIYC) and National Diet and Nutrition Survey<sup>7</sup> (NDNS) (2013 and 2019 cohorts), findings that there was no strong evidence of Vitamin A or C deficiency in these age groups.

16. The Best Start Foods scheme, in addition to fruit, vegetables and milk, includes pulses and eggs. These additions can more easily support low income families to source vitamins A and C from foods.

### **Health Board distribution**

17. In November 2019, following publication of the Programme for Government, Health Boards were asked, as an interim measure, to expand the provision of Healthy Start vitamins to include all infants up to 12 months and to breastfeeding women until the supply of the new Vitamin D product was available. The process to secure suitable vitamin D products was delayed due to the pandemic. Funding provided in 2020/21 ensured that Boards were able to continue to provide Healthy Start vitamins for these groups during the transition period.

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<sup>4</sup> [DNSIYC UK report ALL chapters DH V10.0.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [SACN vitamin D and health report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [DNSIYC UK report ALL chapters DH V10.0.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [National Diet and Nutrition Survey \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

18. Moving to a universal distribution model allows Vitamin D supplements to be made available to the very youngest children and, by taking a universal approach, would cover those at most risk of disease associated with Vitamin D deficiencies.

19. The vitamin D scheme will be expanded over time to meet the Programme for Government commitment, as resources allow and distribution models are tested and developed.

## **Summary**

20. The vitamin scheme in Scotland should provide vitamin supplementation to these core groups to meet the current commitment.

Pregnant women – Healthy Start Vitamins (C, D and Folic Acid)

All children up to age 1 – Vitamin D

All breastfeeding mothers (for as long as they continue to breastfeed) – Vitamin D

*Supporting Maternal and Child Health Team*

*Scottish Government*

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